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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [TU](#)  
SUBJECT: BIBLE SOCIETY'S EXPERIENCE TRANSCENDS RELIGIOUS  
FREEDOM CONCERNS IN TURKEY

REF: 06 ISTANBUL 2091

Classified By: Consul General Deborah K. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Bible Society in Turkey, established by Congregational Protestant missionaries in Istanbul in 1820, continues to enjoy freedom from government interference in its operations. Notably, its recent publication of a Kurdish language Bible received little GOT attention and was even described as a positive sign of the strength of the Republic in at least one popular Turkish weekly. The Society's experience is an example of Turkey's religious tolerance at its best, particularly when contrasted with onerous GOT administrative restrictions on other religious minority institutions. End summary.

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A History of Unimpeded Bible Publishing and Sales  
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¶2. (SBU) Nestled in the heart of Istanbul's historic Eminonu District, on a side street just behind the famed 17th Century Spice Bazaar, is a non-descript building which is home to the Bible Society in Turkey (BST). We met with Executive Secretary Tamar Karasu and Project Coordinator Behnan

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Konutgan to discuss BST's operations and relations with the GOT, as well as with Turkish society, in general. Karasu explained that both its Eminonu office and a bookstore located prominently on Istanbul's popular shopping boulevard Istiklal Caddesi, were opened in the 19th Century. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (which later became the American Board Mission and was linked to the establishment of Istanbul's elite Robert College -- the oldest American school outside of the US -- before its founder broke from the Board in order to establish the school's independence) created the organization in 1820 for the purpose of selling Bibles and built the Eminonu building that same year.

¶3. (SBU) Konutgan noted that the American Board Mission, which aside from providing the Eminonu office space now has very little to do with BST, spun off the latter in 1966 as the American Bible Society. The Istiklal Caddesi bookstore is registered under the name of the British and Foreign Bible Society. Together, the American Bible Society's Eminonu office and the British and Foreign Bible Society's Istiklal Caddesi bookstore make up the BST. Konutgan lamented the American Board Mission's transfer of most of its assets and operations, including the majority of the Eminonu building, to the Turkish Health Education Foundation in 1995 without notifying BST. The American Board Mission provides free office space to the Society in the small part of the building that it still owns but Konutgan worries BST could lose the

space should the American Board Mission entirely close down its operations, which he claims are now limited to a library and three-person office serving as regional representative for the American Church Council.

14. (SBU) Karasu, an Armenian Turk who has managed BST for three years, told us the GOT does not interfere with the Society's work, which includes translating, publishing and selling Bibles. She explained the only requirement the government imposes on publishing Bibles is "the selected language must be spoken in this land." She added the Society itself incorporates high levels of scrutiny in its procedures. For example, during a translation project a consultant from the United Bible Society (a UK-based umbrella organization) visits BST quarterly to check on translators' work. Because BST is ecumenical, noted Karasu, the completed draft is sent to churches representing all of the different Christian denominations in Turkey so that they may proofread it and identify any concerns. She stressed the only problems the Society has with the government are structural, explaining that because the organization was established during the Ottoman Empire, it is not registered with the Chamber of Commerce and therefore cannot import or export publications.

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Reaction to Kurdish Bible Suggests Changing Attitudes  
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15. (C) Recent BST projects include a new Turkish translation of the Bible, which has generated approximately 80,000 copies in sales since its release in 2001. In addition, the Society published the first Kurdish language Bible in September 2005 and plans to print a revision of a 3rd Century edition of a Syrian New Testament recently discovered in Europe. Konutgan told us the Kurdish language Bible stirred up, in some

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circles, traditional fears of Kurdish nationalism. He explained that while working on the project he received a call from a public prosecutor who stated the "secret police" had expressed concerns that this edition included information intended to incite Kurdish nationalist sentiments. According to Konutgan, the prosecutor clearly doubted the validity of the accusation but conducted a cursory investigation as required and determined there was no case to pursue. As a sign of potentially changing attitudes towards Turkey's Kurds, the popular Turkish tabloid Tempo covered the release of the Bible with a headline, "Kurdish Bible Is Out But We Are Still Not Divided" suggesting Kurdish language publications do not necessarily threaten the unity of the Republic.

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Education is Key to Progress  
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16. (C) Konutgan, who is also a pastor in the co-located Baptist Church, drew a distinction between the BST's experience with the government and the latter's treatment of minority communities in general, which he characterized as embarrassing to the Turkish nation and analogous to a "man beating his wife." He recounted disturbing personal experiences with GOT officials, stating he had been arrested numerous times and the security forces maintain a large file on him. "The problem is the police don't know the laws and the government doesn't teach anything about Christianity," he explained. He noted the current government has done better than previous administrations but that this was likely due to EU accession related reforms. Ironically, Konutgan lamented that the EU, for its part, is "neglecting Christianity -- the only thing that binds it together." He predicted that unless the EU changed its ways there would be no Union for Turkey to join in the future.

17. (SBU) Both Karasu and Konutgan agreed BST enjoyed "very

good relations with its neighbors." Aside from a few, minor incidents of verbal condemnation, the two could not recall any significant example of societal discrimination against the organization. Karasu reported BST is very well received at book fairs with many people expressing curiosity, if not interest, in its publications. Stressing the strength of inter-faith relations, Konutgan told us some of BST's best contracted printers were Muslims.

18. (SBU) BST's charter is deeply rooted in the printing of Bibles, however it has recently expanded its reach by experimenting with more contemporary media, as well. Karasu explained the organization is a partner in an Istanbul-based television channel Turk Seven (the name is a play on words as "seven" in Turkish means "he who loves"), which last month began broadcasting Christian programming four hours a day in Turkey via satellite. Konutgan proudly showed us a DVD he produced entitled "St. Paul in Anatolia," noting it is not intended to be used as a proselytizing vehicle but rather demonstrates Christianity's ties to Turkey, which he called "the Forgotten Holy Land."

19. (C) Comment: Turks still take pride in their history of religious tolerance. BST's nearly 200-year experience in Istanbul is consistent with reports from members of most religious minority communities in Turkey that they are able to freely practice their faiths. At the same time, religious tolerance has not always equated to religious freedom or equality of treatment, and the GOT has imposed significant procedural restrictions affecting the ability of religious communities to administer their institutions (reftel). How comfortable religious minorities feel within Turkish society in general is largely driven by how they are portrayed in the media. Konutgan suggests the government has failed to live up to its leadership responsibility in educating the public about minority religions. The resulting ignorance, he implies, is sometimes amplified by the media and often reflected by the behavior of low level government officials such as the police. Nevertheless, BST's experience and particularly the Kurdish Bible example are promising case studies for religious freedom, as well as Kurdish rights in Turkey. End comment.  
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